

*“Although a Present Existence of Cricot 2 is Impossible,
the Mission is Still On: to Transmit as Much as Possible
to as Many People as Possible”*

*Interview with Andrzej Kowalczyk, Visual Artist and Theatre
Director, Renowned Actor of the Cricot 2 Theatre¹*

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Abstract: The following interview with Andrzej Kowalczyk, actor of the Cricot 2 Theatre and a prolific visual artist on the contemporary Polish cultural stage, has been conducted via e-mail, as a result of my professional visit to Cracow, June-July 2015, when I had the opportunity to meet and talk to Mr. Kowalczyk, attend one of his performances at Cricoteka and see some of his artistic works. Later that year, in December 2015, I was back in Cracow and I again had the chance to see his theatre production **52 Hz** and set the basis for this conversation. Mr. Kowalczyk has chosen to answer my questions in Polish and the result is a candid and highly informative discussion about Tadeusz Kantor and his legacy, about Andrzej Kowalczyk’s perspective on the contemporary artistic world and his personal approach to art and theatre.

Keywords: Tadeusz Kantor, Cricot 2, theatre, artistic influences, future projects

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Fig. 1. Andrzej Kowalczyk in the production *52 Hz*, 2015
Photo: Juriana Jur

ANDRZEJ KOWALCZYK, born in 1956 in Cracow, is an actor, theatre director, painter and architect. He is a graduate of the Faculty of Architecture from the Cracow Technological University (1982). Between 1984 and 1988 he participated in all the activities of Cricoteka. From 1985 to 1992, as an actor of the Cricot-2 Theatre, he took part in the productions *Let The Artists Die*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (Barcelona), *I Shall Never Return*, *Today Is My Birthday*. After Tadeusz Kantor's death he continued his artistic activity in the theatrical event *Anatomy Lesson According To Tadeusz Kantor* – a debate organized with part of the Cricot-2 troupe (1991). In 1994 he took part in an outdoor theatre event in Scandinavia (as part of an international team).

On an ongoing basis, he cooperates with Teresa & Andrzej Welmiński – as a stage designer, director and actor, taking part in such theatre productions and workshops like: *Maniacs* (1993), *America Or Don't Look Back* (1995), *Da liegt der Hund begraben – Germanias Halluzinationen* (Theater Rampe, Stuttgart, 1997), *De Dolende Ney* (Amsterdam, 1999), *Gone, Past and so Will All The Stories* (2007), *Pages From The Book Of...* (2013), International Workshops – *Kwintofron* *Wieczorowicz Theatre* (Cricoteka 2013); *Against Nothingness Or 3 cm Above An Empty Head* (Edinburgh 2014).

The production *Pages From The Book Of...* (2013), directed by Teresa & Andrzej Welmiński, in which Andzik Kowalczyk participated as an actor, was presented in 2013 within The Festival of Wandering Theatres (Gardzienice) Poland and in 2016 at the "Eugene Ionesco" Theatre Biennale (BITEI) from Chişinău, Moldova, and within two important festivals from Romania: The International Theatre Festival from Sibiu and the Babel Art Festival in Târgovişte.

In 2004 he received The Dean of the Faculty of Architecture Award of the Cracow Technological University during the 10th International Architecture Biennale in the architectural design competition for the project of the Tadeusz Kantor Museum (team Jacek Czech, Andrzej Kowalczyk, Jakub Kowalczyk). In 2009 in Woodruff, and in 2012 during his stay on Marco Island (USA) he worked on the *Animated Paintings* cycle.

In 2015 he carried out numerous artistic activities: the outdoor performance *We Enter This Blindly* (Performedia, Cricoteka), an individual exhibition (Miasto Sztuki gallery, Cracow), and the theatre performance *52 Hz* (Solvay Contemporary Art Centre, Cracow). At the same time, he conducted theatre workshops in Olkusz and international workshops within the cycle *Very Short Lessons* in Cricoteka: *Conversations at... The Search for Past Totalities* and *Et in Arcadia Ego* by Teresa & Andrzej Welmiński. He also participated in the international exhibition "Obverse Reverse" (Cracow).

Eugen Wohl: *Mr. Kowalczyk, you are a complex artist, a visual artist, a painter, an actor, a theatre director, a set designer, and at the same time, a graduate of the Faculty of Architecture at the Cracow Technological University. A truly interesting career path. How does one bring together the "mathematical" rigor of Architecture with the "free spirit" of Art? In other words, was there, in your case, a transition from Architecture to Art, or are they two complementary dimensions?*

Andrzej Kowalczyk: I chose the perspective of working in the theatre, leaving my friends and my commitments in the field of architecture. Tadeusz Kantor made it possible for me to work in the Cricot 2 theatre – a wonderful avant-garde phenomenon of the 20th century – for five years. All the artistic projects that followed were marked by that passion of his, to which I succumbed and that refuses to abandon me. From my architectural studies, I brought to theatre the consciousness of the space. I have observed very attentively and have been studying Kantor's achievements in his various artistic fields. It is like the enthrallment through painting – first comes the

state of delight, then the observer becomes aware of the causes of this contentment: he notices the arrangement of the patches of color, their combination, the contrasts, the lines, the gesture imprisoned in the texture, one minute expressive, the next precise and calligraphic. Then the public has the confirmation that they are looking at an admirable object.

Theatre's remarkable trump card is the way it manipulates using elements of perspective, the idea of spaces that are closed, open, accessible, inaccessible, irrevocably covered or only concealed. That intrigues me and I often come back to Cricot 2 in order to find out, with satisfaction, the next threads of this entire process of stating precisely, of fulfillment, of manipulation by the means of the Great Geometry's abstract ideas. So, in a few brief words, I can say I entered the theater from architecture, and I went back to architecture bringing the theatre with me. I did not go back alone, but with my son Jakub and with Mateusz, Tereska and Andrzej's son.

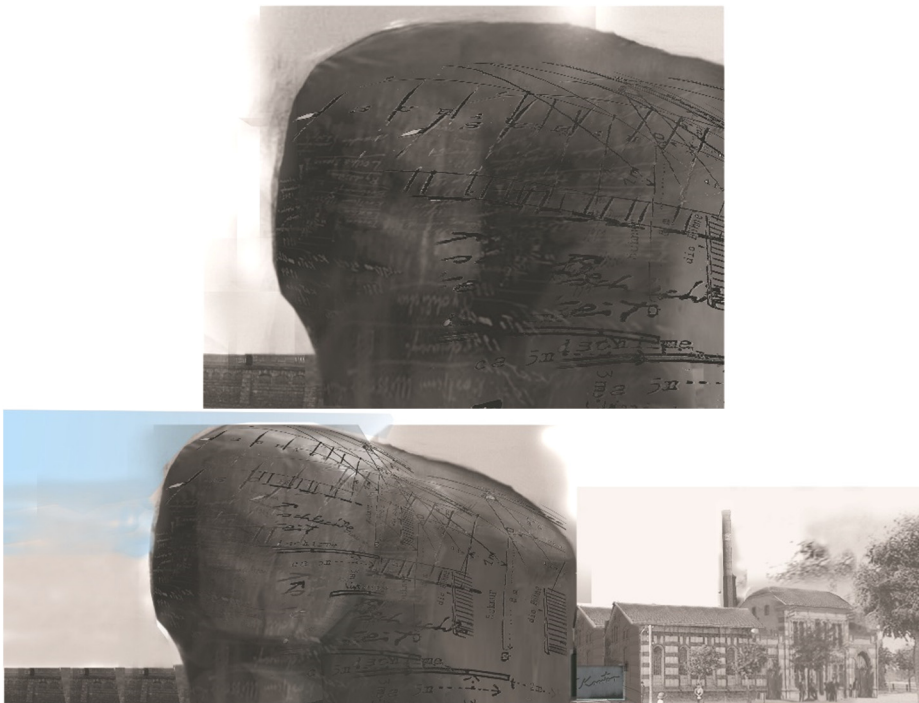


Fig. 2 & 3. *The project Cricoteka Nadwiślańska, Jacek Czech, Andzik Kowalczyk, Kuba Kowalczyk, Mateusz Welmiński*

E. W.: *Please, tell us a little about your collaboration with Tadeusz Kantor and the Cricot 2 Theatre, about the theatre productions you participated in and the creative processes behind Kantor's work.*

A. K.: I will answer briefly, as I have already discussed this on various occasions. I was there during three newly-conceived productions, entirely absorbed, excited and emotionally devoted to my participation to Kantor's amazing art. I was both creator and participant in the production of objects, costumes, sculptures, paintings, exhibitions; I managed the technical works in the workshop and on stage. When I had to, I helped Kantor out as his driver; I was an actor of *Cricot 2* and I bought the most various things for him. Besides the three new theatre productions, *Let the Artists Die*, *I Shall Never Return* and *Today is My Birthday*, I also performed in the revised version of *Wielopole, Wielopole*. I also assisted in the coordination of my favorite production, *The Dead Class*, and served on stage according to Kantor's indications several times, since 1986.



Fig. 4. *The project Cricoteka Nadwiślańska, Jacek Czech, Andzik Kowalczyk, Kuba Kowalczyk, Mateusz Welmiński*

E. W.: *After Tadeusz Kantor's death in 1990, the Cricot 2 Theatre ceased to exist. To this day however, you continue to collaborate with your former fellow actors Andrej and Teresa Welmiński in various artistic projects. Please tell us a little about these projects, about their role in preserving and broadening Tadeusz Kantor's legacy.*

A. K.: On December 8th, 1990 came the time to say goodbye. We felt the natural need to address that dramatic situation using the language we all knew. Cricot 2 performed *Today is My Birthday* for 2 more years, and then it ceased its activity.

That is another reason why *The Anatomy Lesson* proposed by Andrzej Welmiński in 1991 also became my performance. The belief in our artistic community gave us hope that the group will survive. The condition was to find similar emotions and needs, but the team of the old Cricot was not unanimous about these tendencies. Surely, the decisions taken rested upon profound reasons, everyone decided according to their own will. The end of Cricot 2 was eventually put the seal on. Then came into being the Cricot 2 Theatre Actors' Group initiated by Andrzej Welmiński, of which I was part of. Within its framework such productions like *Maniacs or Their Masters' Voice* (1993), *America, or Don't Look Back* (1995), *Gone, Passed and So Will All the Stories* (2007) and others were staged. Nowadays, decentralizing trends are growing stronger and stronger. Polyphony reigns. Former Cricot 2 actors work individually with those that are interested, but not as a team. Teresa, Andrzej and myself are still in close artistic contact.

E. W.: *How influential were Tadeusz Kantor's artistic views in shaping your own artistic trajectory? What other influences, if any, can you speak of in your art? What is the creative force behind your artistic projects? What are the artistic values that you advocate for?*

A. K.: Kantor's influence is magic. He was a great art wizard, but he did disclose his secret actions to those interested. He patiently explained and clarified – in his poetic manifestos, theatre scores or in the guidebooks of his productions– what he had achieved, what delighted him, where he found himself in the accomplishments of others. Throughout his entire life, he materialized his ideas together with his team. We took from Kantor what was best. Each of us gave him as much as we were capable of. Kantor seduced us with his faith in art, he made sure we were part of an artistic accomplishment of the utmost importance.

E. W.: *Your art works, in close relationship with Kantor's perspective on art, willingly ignore, or rather "play with" the idea of frontiers between various art forms. Your theatre productions, for instance, combine elements of performance arts, painting, drawing, sculpture, in an "exhibition-like" manner: all the pieces are equally important and valuable, and the work of art is the result of their "orchestration". Please tell us a few things about the interdisciplinary nature of your artistic work.*

A.K.: The cause is the most important of all. The latest workshops—organized at the Cricoteka in the summer of 2015 – clearly showed how inspiring it is to find support in the artistic statement's distinct necessity. My intention was to have materialized certain commitments towards Tadeusz Kantor. That need of mine, which later became ours (the participants') mobilized the team towards an emotional theatre of action. Real plot threads interlaced with values brought forth by the participants. The poetic dimension of the entire event was a word-for-word reality, the representation was realized without decorativeness, without exaltation. Kantor's theater and art captured me thirty years ago. I am not interested in a classification into disciplines. My paintings are installations: water drips, a magic radio eye blinks, an immovable painting in my house is video-transmitted through the participation of some artist friends on a gallery screen, objects murmur through the trickling sand. The cycle of animated works refers to various contents, but all the works measure the time that passes: time that is well-used, time that is wasted, time that is running right now, time that has already passed. They ask questions about the future time, that is given, promised to us. I am extremely attracted by the animation of objects and paintings, I also love distance very much, and the sense of humor in art. As a consequence of my experience with the art of Tadeusz Kantor, Andrzej Pawłowski, Zbigniew Gostomski, Andrzej Wełmiński, and also with the sensitive critique of the great Mieczysław Porębski, I have found my own perspective. Have I managed to achieve the ability to convince in my own language? Is anything good coming out of the objects of my fascination? Maybe. Sometimes I begin to work on something instinctively but I only finish it years later, when some emotion becomes the motto of that initial start.



Fig. 5. Andrzej Kowalczyk, *Ideological Theatre Drawings from 1992 to 1994*

E. W.: *In close connection to the previous question, please tell us a few words about the relationship between Space – Object – Performer in your theatre productions.*

A. K.: The space is something that captivates me the most. In theatre, a conscious use of the space is extremely important. Maria Jarema accomplished in *Cricot* a geometric abstraction exceptionally consistently. A very simple example: she used a loose cloak with many holes, inside which was the body of the actor covered in a colorful body suit. A few patches sewn on this inside suit made it more lively, and colored flashes appeared when the actor moved on stage. What was important was to cover and to discover. The movement inside and the delayed effect on the outside layer. The entire range of impressions, which the viewer does not analyze, yields to the overall emotion. It was only a few dozen centimeters, in other words, a micro-scale, but we can have the entire cosmos of the stage at our disposal.

We can – and this is what actually happened in last year's workshops – show the *Monumental Stage* from Tadeusz Kantor's production, a monumental object that Kantor intended to hang above the performance space to make the characters/actors appear smaller, but in the end chose not to use it. Such

was the intention, and then suddenly a new idea emerged: we can take advantage of the fact that the original was made of two elements (the Stage was made of two parts rigidly connected) and assemble the object in the stage etude. The animated object changed into a pair of swinging, levitating arms. And the dramaturgy went on building itself further by itself. The theme that I find fundamental, which is the dependence between the actor and the object, and I talked about its scale with the participants in the workshops during the preparations, also had an effect on the public, although the public did not take part in that theoretical story during our preparations. I achieve a didactic effect through the artistic activity of the participants.

E. W.: *Which do you consider to be your most significant artistic projects?*

A. K.: Surely, I consider very significant the open-air performance from 1995 based on many of my set designing projects, costumes and directorial ideas, entitled *Vive la foresta*. Eventually the group I collaborated with – Kristiina Hurmerinta, Anna Proszkowska, Helga Brynjolfsdottir, Steffan Herrig, my friend Tomasz Dobrowolski, with music played by Riku Nemi's band Avanti! – broke up after the second tour, and I haven't seen them since. Thread plots that were not realized back then often come back to me.



Fig. 6. Andrzej Kowalczyk, *Vive la Foresta*, poster project based on Marjukka Vainio's photo, 1995

E. W.: *In 2015, the entire artistic world celebrated the centenary birthday of Tadeusz Kantor. In this context, you have recently completed an ambitious and complex artistic endeavor which included theatre workshops, performances, exhibitions and culminated with an event entitled Huge Sign Below Cricoteka Mirrors. Please tell us a few words about this project dedicated to the memory of Tadeusz Kantor.*

A. K.: *Huge Sign Below Cricoteka Mirrors* is a peculiar artistic event. It has a certain beginning, but I don't know the end. It's just the way it is. In my production *We Enter (in This) in the Dark* the Signal man initiated it – he gave the signal, which then ricocheted against the mirrors (in the courtyard in front of the Cricoteka a mirrored space covers the ceiling of a fragment of the building construction). Since 2015 I recall that signal to the mirrors after each of my theatrical representations. The conceptual formula allows us to achieve a reflection from the most distant perspective. An addition to the event is the posters printed by me and ordered chronologically. I invite all my friends to participate, every form of involvement is significant. For instance, it can be to deliver a recording of voices from the subway or a clearly indicated creative plot thread, like Zbyszek Gostomski's conceptual signals, or Wanda Warska vocalising. In August this year I will finish the show at the end of the workshops precisely with a group "signal". This artistic event realized by Cricoteka results from some of my friends' need to cooperate. Thereby I bring a part of my artistic life into the space of the Cricoteka.



Fig. 7. Andrzej Kowalczyk, *Poster for the production "Huge Sign Below Cricoteka Mirrors", 2016*

E. W.: *What are Andrzej Kowalczyk's future artistic projects?*

A. K.: I have been collaborating with Tereska Welmińska and Andrzej Welmiński since the dawn of time. I have also worked independently with Lila Krasicka, Mira Rychlicka, Eugeniusz Bakalarz, Zbyszek Bednarczyk, Jan Güntner, Tomek Dobrowolski, Staszek Michno. With Zofia Kalińska, we are helping one another artistically. We are all from Cricot 2. Although a present existence of Cricot 2 is impossible, the mission is still on: to transmit as much as possible to as many people as possible. Let the others look to Kantor's creation for the achievement of their intentions.

This fact, that we are apart, has an effect on my intense painting. One can find in it gradually less plane surfaces, and more space and concealment. I see the future like a wonderful *Broken Line Aiming for the Infinity* by Zbyszek Gostomski, I am fascinated by his synthetic language. Extremely important to me are Maria Jarema's and Andrzej Pawłowski's entire creation (which was actually initiated by Cricot). Theater dealing with that kind of spheres is my theatre. Kantor's poetics based on the 20th century avant-garde still captivates me, but it is not my alphabet. Even Kantor's mythical garbage can is now a relic. My garbage can is piles of plastic, plastic bags. But a repulsive plastic bag lifted up in the air, windswept to all directions – it moves people and creates the poetry of the 21st century. The "lowest rank" category created by Kantor started its journey, unsinkable plastic bottles go through transcontinental routes– unasked. Foil levitates among the clouds. Decorative bows thrown away by people hobble birds. And even Don Quixote's energy-saving windmill causes havoc to their wandering v-formations.

I am thoroughly documenting the history of objects from Kantor's performances – existing objects and lost ones. I am the bearer of some of the information myself, while some I gather from those who participated. I would very much like to recall the object "war automatons", as I call, for working purposes, the platform of mechanical soldiers constructed in Florence for the performance *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Not a trace was left of it – besides Tadeusz Kantor's drawings and the actors' reports. It was a beautiful idea to place living actors on a platform and to make them perform all together, mechanically, with forced movements. And that is not all: the entire construction had to move around. The object was almost finished. Unfortunately, a potential danger was identified for the actors to whom counterweights were attached: along with the podium, they constituted a bulky, uncontrolled mass. That settled the matter: we stopped working on it. The vehicle sank into oblivion. There are many such remains to be rediscovered...



Fig. 8. Andrzej Kowalczyk,
Pneumatophore – no. 1



Fig. 9. Andrzej Kowalczyk,
Pneumatophore – no. 2

E. W.: *Thank you very much for this interview!*

A.K.: Thank you as well, and a tip of the hat to my collaborators, Karolina Czerska and Anna Baranowa. Cheers!



Fig. 10. Andrzej Kowalczyk, *Stage Pneumatophore*: *“Change a dirty, greasy paper bag into a pneumatophore. Enter the context - iron reserve air, resuscitation, last breath....”*

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